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Conflict Management and Development of Perspective Taking Abilities in Cameroon Schools

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Abstract
There is a growing concern about violence in schools and society today. In particular, the issue of aggressive behavior and bullying in schools in Cameroon is receiving much attention especially from the government and media. This is not surprising when conflicts managed destructively or left unresolved, escalate and consequently interfere with the learning process and playground harmony. Educators, Guidance Counselors and School Psychologists are presented with the arduous challenge of managing behavioral problems in the classroom, particularly those associated with overactive, disruptive, and aggressive behaviors. This paper discusses the different definitions of conflict, strategies to help prevent school conflict, moving conflict situations toward cooperation, the development of perspective taking in children, and concluding remarks.

Keywords: Conflict Management and Perspective Taking Abilities

Introduction
The increasing level of concern about violence in schools is evident in the initiatives undertaken by the Cameroon Government and non-governmental organizations over the last few years. September 21st 2010, was declared as a day of peace, especially within the school communities in Cameroon. Ngwane (2010) is of the opinion that, while this was a laudable initiative aimed at imparting a culture of peace at an early level in the school milieu, education authorities still need to go beyond the event by crafting visions and views around a sustainable and holistic flagship programme on Peace Education in Cameroon.

Mforndip (2008) argues that**,** the Cameroon educational system is rubbed by many conflicting situations. This is because those responsible for the day-to-day function of the schools are ill-equipped to handle conflict situations. Both the school leaders and teachers lack the knowledge and skills necessary to improve relationship between learners and teachers. Fortunately for Cameroon, conflict management skills can be taught and learned. The overall tones of the schools have often been characterized by conflicts. Consequently, some schools have become unsafe places for learning. In September 2003, AFRICAphonie held a one week workshop on "Designing curriculum and training of teacher trainers for Peace Education in Cameroon" in Yaounde. The workshop brought together more than 80 teachers from schools in Cameroon to work out guidelines for designing a curriculum on peace and nation building ((Ngwane, 2010).

Without denying the importance of conflict management techniques, conflict could be viewed more positively, as a natural and fundamental part of everyday life. Conflict is inevitable during children's classroom and playground

interactions. Conflict, when constructively managed, can stimulate development, adaptation and change. But the benefits of conflict are rarely promoted in the interactions of children.

One of the reasons why conflict may be receiving so much recent attention is not because this is a new phenomenon, or because the incidences are reportedly increasing in their number and severity, but because of the difficulties that individuals have in dealing with the often complex issues surrounding conflict. The question most relevant to ask now is: Can conflict have beneficial effects on the psychological and social development of children? For many people, this is a radical question, in that conflict is commonly regarded as a negative event (Selman, 1981). For many theorists, however, the question is not radical. Quite the opposite, in fact: Conflict has been widely recognized as a central force in developmental change, for both good and ill. Many different functions – cognition, social cognition, emotions, and social relations – are thought to be formed and/or transformed by conflict.

Meaning and Nature of Conflict

Conflict is a phenomenon that is present in our every day interaction. Some conflicts are "latent" and do not involve overt fighting; and some overt fights, such as wrestling matches, are not due to a conflict. Thus, it is important to agree on what is and what is not a conflict.

It is not surprising to note that even theoreticians differ in how they view conflict. For many practical purposes, they may understand it as a special set of interrelated elements: parties, issues, dynamics, and contexts. To gain a deeper understanding, however, they may use certain abstract concepts such as cause and effect; direct, indirect, and intervening causes; and payoff matrices (Bartos & Wehr, 2002).

Researchers of social conflict have offered many different definitions of conflict. Pruitt and Rubin (1986) see conflict as perceived divergence of interests. According to Blalock (1989), conflict is intentional mutual exchange of negative sanctions. This paper sees social conflict as purposeful struggle between actors who use social power to defeat or remove opponents and to gain status, power, resources, and other scarce values.

One would therefore, rightfully acknowledge that there is a good reason for the great variety of definitions. They tend to reflect authors' theoretical orientations: psychologists might define conflict in terms of the adversaries' inner states, sociologists in terms of observable behavior, and so on. The focus here, however, is the theoretical view that conflict can originate either in goal/value incompatibility or in hostility or in both, and that it involves a unique type of behavior, conflict behavior. Thus one can aptly define conflict as a situation in which actors use conflict behavior against each other to attain incompatible goals/values, and/or to express their hostility.

Other definitions fall in line with this goal-based view of conflict. According to him, conflict is the action that results from opposing goals, needs, ideas, and interests that are perceived to limit or interfere with another's. Every communication encounter has a goal to accomplish even if the speaker and audience do not realize it during communication. This goal will fulfill the need of the participants based on individual ideas and interests. The action that results attempts to maximize one's needs and interferes with another's needs.

People do not have to be enemies to be in conflict, and being in conflict does not make people enemies. Interpersonal conflict exists whenever two or more people disagree. By this definition, conflict occurs between friends and lovers as well as between competitors and enemies. The discord may be caused by a simple misunderstanding, or it may be a product of incompatible goals, values, attitudes, or beliefs. This paper therefore indicates that, conflict is an unavoidable aspect of interactions in children's daily life in school. Knowing how to deal constructively with it is essential.

Preventing Serious Conflict in Schools in Cameroon

Because incompatibility of goals is a major source of conflict, a school can lessen conflict by addressing the main causes of incompatible goals: social injustice, role conflict and value differences. But a school can also build into itself a tolerance for "healthy" conflict. Simmel & Coser (1956) argued that both attraction and repulsion between

groups are essential for social integration and continuity. A "healthy" school, organization, or group maintains a balance of cooperative and oppositional relations.

If a school in Cameroon looks into conflict as both friend and foe, it has a better chance of preventing serious and costly types of conflict. The more inventive it is, the less likely that inevitable tensions will produce high-cost conflict. Because low-intensity conflicts are rarely encouraged in schools in Cameroon, three ways to increase their use, or preventing the escalation of conflict will be examined. These are: balanced sociation, consultation and effective communication.

Balanced Sociation

Balanced sociation is a conscious effort by a school to make both cooperation and conflict prominent in public consciousness, formal education, and public investment. The assumption is that a continuing tension between the two is important for stable and productive social relations.

Balanced sociation could be strengthened through a society's education process. Skills at opposing constructively could be taught alongside those of cooperating and getting along. Relations with one's opponent would be understood in both their associative and their dissociative dimensions. Both coercive and cooperative conflict resolution would be taught as art forms in the schools. Mediators, arbitrators, national defense specialists, and other conflict professionals would learn how to balance sociation and use conflict in their work.

Consultation

Even in societies that acknowledge and teach balanced sociation as an explicit principle of healthy social relations, many groups' interests will be potentially in conflict. They will continue to see many of their goals as incompatible with those of others. Helping groups to distinguish actual from illusory goal incompatibility is a promising strategy for conflict prevention. Increasing consultation among potential conflict groups need not involve major redistribution of power, though it could lead there over time. It might simply involve creating a more consultative decision process. Just sounding out all those to be directly affected by a decision usually reduces the likelihood of conflict potential. Consultation helps reveal where true goal incompatibility exists and where it does not. Effective communication also helps in the prevention of conflict.

Effective communication

Preventing conflict through consultation requires effective communication. As communicators send and receive messages, there is enormous opportunity for slippage in the sequence of what is meant, said, heard, or understood. We are sometimes amazed at how what we meant to say was so misunderstood. Words and their accompanying nonverbal messages often contradict one another.

As conflict emerges, adversaries become more emotional. Anger, fear, hostility, and suspicion all make communicators more likely to send and receive faulty messages to and from their opponents and their supporters alike. Emotion control is one way to encourage accuracy. The context of communication is also important. The more background noise and distraction, the less clear the message. The pace and difficulty of message exchange also influence how long and carefully one considers a message before responding to it. For example, a conflict among a university's physics faculty intensified as participants dashed off e-mail responses to one another, unrestrained by slower, more direct, and more demanding nonelectronic ways of communicating. Conversely, when the parties can verify their communication, they tend to increase their accuracy (Bartos & Wehr, 2002).

Methods have been developed to overcome obstacles to effective communication. With "I messages," (an "I message" usually begins with "I" and continues on to express a state of emotion or belief such as "I feel that we are not understanding…") for example, the sender clarifies the intended meaning of the message. Such messages locate the conflict outside the listener, where it can more easily be reframed for cooperative resolution. They often expand the opponent's ability to listen and hear. They also focus on behavior rather than the person as the source of conflict. Less likely to be felt as personal attacks, they encourage a similar "I" response from the other (Bartos & Wehr, 2002).

Moving School Conflict toward Cooperation

According to Deutsch and Coleman (2000), school conflict can take either a cooperative or coercive path. Which direction it takes depends on how it is "framed" by the conflict parties. If they characterize it as a problem solvable through their joint effort, cooperative approaches – such as negotiation – will be adopted. If, however, the conflict is seen as a win-lose struggle, coercive processes – such as power contests – will likely be the initial strategy of choice. To get started towards resolution, it is imperative to first of all reframe the conflict.

Reframing the Conflict

The so-called framing process can limit the cost of conflict. Teachers normally begin it by getting children in conflict to redefine a conflict each has already framed as a "zero-sum" (what one gains the other loses) struggle. Reframing participants' perception of the conflict can lead them to consider a number of cooperative conflict resolution techniques. In order to understand these techniques, it is necessary to consider the basic process through which cooperation can be achieved in schools, the process of negotiation (Bartos and Wehr, 2002).

Negotiation: Negotiation occurs when conflict parties agree to meet face-to-face to resolve their conflict. The so-called integrative bargaining approach to negotiation has been widely accepted as one of the most promising (Fisher and Ury, 1981).

Integrative bargaining starts from the assumption that the interests of the conflict parties are seldom totally opposed to one another, that quite often, there are common interests not being considered. It approaches negotiation as joint problem solving, a process that permits all negotiators to discover common interests, to identify ways to "increase the size of the pie" available, and even to "bake" more pies. Its goal is to identify the true interests of negotiators, and to build an agreement that meets those interests. It differs from the more conventional and costly "positional bargaining," where positions, demands, and subsequent mutual concessions are inherent in the process.

Promoting Trust: Integrative bargaining provides negotiators with a process that, through personal sharing, can build trust by eliminating various emotional and communication obstacles. Trust can be further strengthened when a negotiator's verbal and nonverbal communications coincide. In every social encounter, each of us presents a positive "face," or image of self, composed of attributes of which we feel society approves. In other words, we all try to look our best. According to Bartos and Wehr (2002), in the negotiation setting, for example, our best face would likely be conciliatory, powerful, firm, confident, fair, efficient, deserving, and so on. Our success as a negotiator will depend largely on how well we maintain our "negotiating face," how credible it is to our opponent across the table. We maintain it through what Goffman (1967) calls "face work" – the actions "taken by a person to make whatever he or she is doing consistent with face". In negotiation, above all, we want our opponents to take us seriously. The more they can be reassured that our face truly represents a reliable negotiating self behind it the more likely they are to respond likewise and with confidence, and move toward agreement.

Children can learn how to act as credible negotiators – in fact, how to be credible negotiators. They can be trained in the "face skill" components of negotiation: facial expressions and other body language, voice intonation, conciliatory physical gestures, timing, face saving, and so on. The trust of one's negotiating partner is achieved in large part by a credible performance.

Fairness in Negotiation: One criterion can be applied to settlements: attempting to make "it just." A settlement may be said to be just if it conforms to some universally accepted and invariant principle. Zartman et al. (1996) distinguish among three main principles of fairness: priority, equality, and proportionality. The **priority** principle usually identifies a winner, and does so by applying an external principle or precedent. The **equality** principle postulates that the adversaries should receive equal shares. The **proportionality** principle – also known as the "equity" principle – prescribes that the adversaries be rewarded in proportion to their merit or need. Following this principle, rewards should be proportional to an actor's merit: the greater her contributions and investments, the greater her share should be.

Developing Perspective Taking Abilities in Children

Perspective-taking is an ability that requires a child to emit a selection response of informational states in himself or herself and in others. Barnes-Holmes (2004) taught typically developing children between the ages of 6-11 perspective-taking skills. His study used a multiple probe design to evaluate the participants' abilities to demonstrate a number of simple and complex relations, and examined both relation type and relational complexity. This study also tested for generalization of perspective taking to new stimuli and real-world conversational topics and found that the capacity to alter perspectives can be established by means of a history of reinforced relational responding.

Thompson (2006), on his part emphasizes the aspect of expressing emotion. He found that when teachers and families talk about emotion in an everyday context, children become more adept at understanding others. Gopnik (1994) believes children should be given real experiences in understanding others. She finds that when she and her colleagues explain why others might have different thoughts and feelings than their own as these issues come up in schools, the children are more attuned to others' thinking thereby avoiding conflicting situations. Giving children a chance to explain their thinking to others also helps.

Selman (1981) brought out ways to facilitate the growth of interpersonal understanding in his developmental and clinical analysis. These are:

- Encourage greetings & social initiations to demonstrate awareness of others;
- Encourage sharing of toys, games, play equipment, & personal treasures;
- Encourage making-choices & turn-taking;
- Expect reciprocity in language, and in actions. Script it if necessary. Do not allow students to ignore social cues in language. (e.g. Hi, how are you?);
- Practice & model complimenting others. (e.g. “I really like your new jacket”);
- Model & demonstrate empathy for others. (e.g.”I’m sorry you hurt yourself playing soccer”;
- Teach students to listen and accurately interpret social interactions or conversations;
- Provide students with ways they can elicit assistance from others to interpret non-verbal social cues;
- Encourage the student to reach out to others & help them. Demonstrate ways a person can help another person;
- Encourage mutual respect for another person’s values or ideas;

There are ways teachers and parents in Cameroon can help children develop perspective taking abilities like talking about other’s thinking and feelings, giving children real experiences in understanding others. For example, mothers who talk about their newborns as people to their older siblings ("She is crying, do you think she is hungry?") among other things, have siblings who are more likely to be friendly with each other years later. Moreover, for teachers in Cameroon to help children develop perspective taking abilities, it is important for them to include discussions of characters' perspectives in stories children listen to and read.

Concluding Remarks

Conflict is considered to be both a determinant and an outcome of children’s interactions with their friends. That is, conflict management is believed to determine whether or not children become friends and what their friendships may be like but also to determine the residual derived from these relationships by individual children. Conflict and friendship relations cannot be discussed without considering them in temporal perspective. Disagreements, for example, have beginnings, middles, and ends – causes, instigating, and oppositional tactics, resolution attempts, and outcomes. Friendships also have beginnings, middles, and ends – formative, maintenance, and termination “stages. Conflicts also differ between friends and non-friends according to the contexts in which the disagreements occur. Disagreements differ, for example, according to the settings in which they occur, the tasks (issues) confronting the disagreers, and the interpersonal relations existing between the parties.

In order to manage conflicts in our schools, the teacher’s role is to facilitate and encourage prosocial behaviors, provide activities that foster appropriate skills, provide necessary assistance, and develop a social network that supports children in their efforts. Teachers must provide activities that help children identify various social skills and help them understand why the skill is needed. Teachers need to help children develop negotiating skills to handle

conflict situations. Children must use social problem solving skills and listen to others' opinions in order to resolve issues in a matter that benefits them and is acceptable to others.

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